

Media Influence In The Networked Age

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/09/15/media-influence-in-the-networked-age/

2011-9-15

These are notes from a talk I gave to the NATO Defense College in Rome in September 2011. You can [see the slides here](#).

I was asked to talk about:

1. The influence of the media on public opinion and on shaping nato and national policy
2. To compare and contrast how news is edited and reported on traditional and new forms of media
3. To outline a future vision of media – norms, roles and influence

That is a very broad brief, but luckily, that is what I spend my time thinking about. I spent 20 years as a traditional TV journalist making documentaries and editing news programmes at the BBC and ITN before setting up Polis, the media think tank at the LSE five years ago. When I joined ITN in 1999 they had one Internet terminal that you had to ask to use. Mobile phones were rationed. Now my iPhone has more computing power than the whole BBC newsroom a decade ago. And remember Moores Law that means computing power doubles every 18 months. So whatever is changing now will probably change again – but quicker.



I hope I can use this hour to set out some ideas and a few case studies. I am going to talk mainly about social media in connection with conflict and politics – as that seems most relevant to you – although I am not going to analyse NATO's media role in particular in any great detail. I think we have a second session where I can respond more precisely to questions from you on how it relates to NATO or your experience in particular.

A few years ago I gave a lecture on a similar subject to a group of NATO communications officials in Lisbon – it was an educational experience for me and I hope that will be the case this time.

Since then a lot of things have changed in the world of NATO as well the world of Media and I hope to reflect some of that today.

When I spoke to your colleagues a few years ago I had just published a book called SuperMedia which looked at how journalism was about to change globally in the face of new media technologies. The book described how I thought that journalism was going to become much more networked into new citizen media, social media and other more diverse sources of information. I described how I thought it would challenge conventional ideas about control of information and the role of the media – and those like NATO who are both the subject of journalism and who create communications themselves. I welcomed the change and thought it offered all sorts of opportunities for better journalism.

Little did I realise just how quickly things would change.

As we showed in a Polis research report we published in 2010 it is now routine for stories to break first through citizen journalists. It is now general practice for journalists to gather photos and video from social media websites like YouTube. In the military, we now have soldiers in Afghanistan with documentary cameras on their helmets and who write blogs about what they do when in barracks. It used to be the case that during a revolution the rebels would

try to take the national radio station – now we see dictators trying to turn off the Internet.

Just think what it's like to be a citizen in the midst of all this media mayhem and change. Depending where you lived, a decade ago you had the choice of professional radio, TV and newspapers – all owned and run by corporations or the state – all operated by professional journalists. In some states this meant in effect, just a handful of platforms to access information about the world.

Now consider how we get the information we need.

Think about the three things you needed to know this morning.

For me it was:

1. What is the weather like in Rome?
2. Have they caught Gadaffi yet?
3. Which players are going to be fit enough for our away game at Millwall on Saturday?

Now I got that information from a variety of sources – none of them traditional media. I have a smartphone app that tells me the weather in Rome – I would expect Twitter to tell me first if they catch the Colonel – and I would look at the West Ham fans website not the newspapers sports pages for inside knowledge on our build-up to the match at the Den. That is increasingly typical. Social media doesn't replace mainstream media – but it's increasing the range and methods that people access information – and that changes their whole relationship to the stories that are told.

This is what the audience now expects. And we don't have a choice about this. Unless we shut down the Internet somehow and put it all back in the analogue box, then these are the new facts of media life. The citizen now expects all media to be on demand – it's in their control – it's interactive – and they can participate. If you don't provide that, they'll quite likely go somewhere else. It's often networked into mainstream journalism but often it's autonomous – or connects into a whole series of other media providers – perhaps including NATO platforms – perhaps Taliban or Al Qaeda platforms.

Let's look at some case studies.

Think about the role of WikiLeaks and its impact on public perceptions of the military and diplomacy.

I am about to publish a book that looks at significance of WikiLeaks. Instead of trying to judge if its journalism or not, or even whether it's a good thing or not, I have tried to understand what is new about WL and how it might change the way that public opinion is shaped and policy is influenced.

What is interesting about WL is the challenge it sets to authority – both to mainstream media and to those in power such as governments or the military.

First we need to understand what WikiLeaks is and what it has done.

Let's look at the Collateral Murder video.

There were actually two versions – one is highly edited in the manner of a piece of traditional polemical journalism. But at the same time they also made available the raw material.

The point about this video was that it literally made visible how war works. It showed the public directly what the governments and military did not want seen and what mainstream media never really shows us. That is quite remarkable.

You can judge how fairly. In fact there were weapons and insurgents present – the US forces appear to be quite careful – their language may be callous but they proceed with relative caution for a warzone. But it certainly made

manifest a real issue about how war is conducted.

WL started as a pure whistleblower website – secure – immune –transnational – beyond the law – beyond censorship or control. But it wasn't having an impact on the wider global public or decision-makers – that is why it decided to team up with MSM for the Afghan Iraq and Embassy disclosures

This created a series of stories that went around the world – they are different because they give the public most of the evidence – MSM journalists attempted to give them context – but overall they revealed what MSM could not have done.

For the US state department which has committed itself to Internet Freedom and is spending millions on promoting political activism online this was a challenge – the US attacked WikiLeaks – the Administration certainly did nothing to stop corporate American pulling its services from WL. Yet while the State Dept and Military has improved its security systems it knows that modern diplomacy – and therefore modern military strategy – requires vast flows of information – it can revise that system but ultimately it now has to work in a world where its work is more transparent.

WikiLeaks may well crash and burn under the pressure of various rows and legal issues with its founder – it has inspired imitators but its real significance is how it highlighted the failure of MSM to hold authority to account – and it forced authority to reconsider its attitude to the open internet. WikiLeaks demonstrates how new media technologies have potentially altered the balance of communication power: but we have to ask some tough questions when Julian Assange makes claims about justice and transparency:

1. How accountable is WikiLeaks?
2. Does it have any sense of responsibility for what it does?
3. Is it really only effective against democratic, relatively open governments like America? Why no ChinaLeaks?
4. Is it a sustainable process or a kind of transitory hybrid enterprise that exploits aspects of the network?

I think that there will be more Wikileaks phenomena but perhaps more significant is the wider role of social media in challenging power and providing individuals and groups platforms to communicate.

I am sure you are all familiar with the debate around social media and the Arab Spring. Let's just take the Libyan case and play this video – it's not particularly famous or special but it is typical.

Look at all the mobile phones – think about how that spreads those images and amplifies that action.

We can see again how this makes manifest something that Libyan authorities and media did not want to show and could not show.

This directly inspired more opposition – it made visible the protest and dissent.

It provided evidence of an uprising and an example. So it had direct impact.

It was the citizen journalism that helped force the hand of international politicians into intervening when it combined with international MSM

It was the citizen journalism that spread the word internally

And fuelled international attention even when MSM was banned or restricted to the charade of Gadaffi's propaganda machine

Like most international broadcasters, Al Jazeera now has a WikiLeaks style transparency unit and of course a Social Media unit.

Crudely put, in the old media influence paradigm, mainstream media acted as the channel between authority and public organisations – like NATO – and the public, pretty much in a one-way flow.

In the new networked relationship flows of influence are now networked and potentially disintermediated.

CONCLUSIONS

UNCERTAINTY

It's clear now that the networked journalism I predicted has become quite normal and we are now in a new even more challenging phase that promises what I call an Age of Uncertainty. We can't know how any particular event will be represented nor exactly how the public will respond. There are now infinitely more variables in play.

How should journalism and organisations like NATO respond?

TRANSPARENCY

The default expectation of the public is now immediacy and transparency. People are now surprised if they can't instantly access what they think is full information on a story.

For MSM this means they are having to become much more adept at mining these sources of information and of being part of Social Media to reach people where they are having their conversation – it means showing your workings and sharing the communication process as well as the facts/analysis you have.

VERIFICATION

This is also a challenge to journalists to prove their value – in a world of confusing information we need journalists even more to validate this swirl of material and to put it into context.

Likewise for organisations like NATO.

You are now a media organisation – and I don't just mean your press office.

If you want to influence public perceptions then you must be a 'good' communicator. Say what you know and what you don't know – engage. Then you will have value in the communications process and people will value you.

INTERACTIVITY IS ACCOUNTABILITY

In the networked era that means being interactive and accountable as well as accurate and open.

This is not naïve idealism – I may be a cyber optimist, but after 25 years as a journalist I think I am a realist, not a dreamer.

It's much harder for anyone to control the conversation so you have to fight for attention and earn people's trust.

Media Change is now permanent.

Think about the history of reporting war, for example, and you can see that media has always changed – again – and again – and again.

But each time it changes the relationship between the military, the media and the citizen.

And those changes are now built into the way that the Internet, digital media and social networks are evolving – media institutions and organisations such as NATO will always seek to reassert stasis but the technology and social trends will always create change.

COMPLEXITY IS NORMALITY

What is happening may be the most profound shift – since printing – certainly since electronic media was created – but it's also the most complex.

So welcome to the age of uncertainty but also the age of complexity. People don't replace old media with new media – they add layers of communication to their lives. They take new technologies and use them in differentiated ways according to their personal lifestyle or cultural context. We are global but also very local still.

Ultimately, I argue that the media trends are generally in favour of democracy and liberalism – but this depends entirely on how governments, business and other organisations like NATO respond to them. There is nothing naturally progressive or positive about new media – or any media come to that. It is perfectly possible for authoritarian regimes to use the same technology to track and prosecute dissent or to disseminate propaganda – AQ was one of the cleverest networked organisations that used the Internet very well – though not well enough perhaps.

Anyone – myself included – who appears to offer simple solutions or confident certainties – is lying.

Important, finally, to qualify what we mean by influence. There is always a danger of exaggerating media influence – but in an information-saturated world it does appear to condition our actions and attitudes. Remember there are different types of influence: short-term, direct, general framing, personal or collective.

It's a complex process but perhaps the best injunction on how to deal with it is simple: engage.

Charlie Beckett

www.polismedia.org

www.charliebeckett.org

@charliebeckett

c.h.beckett@lse.ac.uk

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science